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San Geminiano Parish Church

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The urban landscape of Venice as residents and visitors see it today has been in a constant state of transformation since its conception. Piazza San Marco, what most would cite as being the heart of the city, underwent numerous renovations to ultimately become the civic, and religious center of the Venetian Republic. Achieving such a feat required sacrifices and one such loss was the destruction of the Church of San Geminiano. The parish church held a prominent space in the Piazza and was central to the commercial and artistic developments of the neighborhood over the course of its existence. An examination of the architectural history of the church as well as the works of art that it housed parallels and provides insight to the history of the Piazza San Marco and consequently, the history of Venice. In this project we have attempted to trace the church's history up to its destruction by Napoleon in terms of its urban context and in relation to the life and work of its architect, Jacopo Sansovino. We have also researched the art within the church and the church's decoration in order to recreate a three-dimensional, visual recreation of the building using the Google Sketch Up program that maintains the building's original proportions and aesthetic.

Biography of Jacopo Sansovino

Jacopo Sansovino was driving force in the transformation of the Piazza San Marco during the Renaissance and executed many of the buildings that today characterize the heart of Venice. Born Jacopo Tatti in Florence in 1486, Sansovino was encouraged early on by his mother to pursue his interest in the work of Michelangelo. In 1502, at the age of sixteen, he entered the workshop of the Florentine sculptor and architect Andrea dal Monte Sansovino, whose name he

adopted. Just three years later in 1505, Sansovino followed his mentor to Rome on the invitation of Pope Julius II, who had invited the master to create a number of monuments to his Cardinals. The young Sansovino continued his studies in Rome while attracting the attention of artists and architects such as Andrea da San Gallo, Bramante, and Raphael. His notable popularity and Roman-influenced style led to several commissions in Florence and Rome, including some from Pope Leo X who was particularly interested in creating beautiful but temporal structures for public pageantry. He was stationed in Rome in 1527 when the city was sacked. Sansovino fled to Venice, intending to stay only briefly before moving on to France on the king's invitation.

The notorious artistic richness of Venice (as well as the prestige and potential challenges that confronted him) proved too intoxicating for Sansovino however and, following a small commission by Doge Andrea Gritti to repair the cupolas of San Marco, he was appointed chief architect and Protomaestro of Venice by the Procurators of San Marco in 1529. Sansovino quickly became one of the most influential artists in Venice and became acquainted with such artists as Titian and Tintoretto.

During his forty-year tenure as chief architect, Sansovino built, collaborated on, or restored numerous churches, palaces, and other buildings throughout Venice. His most outstanding works however are those he produced for the massive overhaul of the Piazza San Marco, a civic project by Doge Gritti for urban renewal in the center of Venice.

Architecture of Piazza San Marco

Originating as a small space in front of the Basilica of San Marco, the piazza, as contemporary visitors see it now, is the culmination of centuries of architectural projects. A major renovation in 1156 gave the Piazza much of the shape that inspired future architects. It was in this year that the Rio Batario canal and a dock were filled in and rearranged to provide

Piazza San Marco with the layout that inspired the design of “Europe’s drawing room” (a phrase popularly attributed to Napoleon upon his entrance into the city’s political and religious center.)

Until the early 16th century, the civic buildings that adorn the Piazza abutted what architectural historian Eugene J. Johnson called an “unruly group of cheese shops” on the waterfront side. In addition, the piazza was also home to a *pescaria*, or fish market. These shops served an important economic function in the city center and Procurators faced considerable resistance in expelling the money changing booths, bakers, meat and vegetable stands, and even latrines that eventually became incorporated into the facade of the new Zecca, or mint, that faced out on the water.

The mastermind behind the renovation of the Piazza, a project of significance to the Procurators whose offices were housed there, was none other than the beloved Jacopo Sansovino. As I have previously mentioned, Sansovino came to Venice under unfavorable circumstances, but his favor with the Procurators garnered him substantial projects in the Republic. Their generosity was made all the more possible by the political and economic resurgence that Venice was enjoying at that time, in an attempt to overcome their humiliating defeat in 1509 at the Battle of Agnadello and others battles during the War of the League of Cambrai.

One of Sansovino’s early Venetian commissions came in 1536 to make a model for the design of the Procuratie Nuove. This structure would ultimately provide the Procurators with more space for their offices. A significant suggestion for the design involved widening the Piazza to more prominently feature the Basilica [Figure 1]. As *nuove* or new implies, Piazza San Marco also features the Procuratie Vecchie on the north side of the square. Buon designed these slightly older, original apartments of the Procurators and the three-story order of the facade seen

at the time of Sansovino (and still standing today) was Codussi's design. Early in his career in Venice, Sansovino was named *proto* of the San Marco project, or the chief architect and superintendent of construction. Sansovino held this position until his death in 1570 and the longevity of his career reflects itself in the unified vision that he created in the San Marco design program. This aesthetic continuity can be seen in his work on the Library, Loggetta and Zecca that surround the piazza. Another of Sansovino's great accomplishments was the facade of the parish church, San Geminiano,

History of the Church of San Geminiano

San Geminiano, located prominently in Venice's urban context, was the oldest of three such churches renovated by Sansovino; the others being San Giuliano and San Martino [Figure 2, 3]. The church was originally constructed in 532 CE as a tribute to the victory of the Venetian general Narsete over the Goths. The Piazza San Marco grew up around the site of the church, until, as I've mentioned, Doge Sebastiano Ziani had it moved further West to accommodate his expansion of the piazza in 1156. San Geminiano maintained its original orientation, facing out onto the newly enlarged square. 250 years later, however, the building was in need of repair.

In 1505, Cristoforo dal Legname, a local architect, began rebuilding the old parish church following his design for a central plan church. Construction came to a halt when the War of the League of Cambrai broke out in 1508, draining much of Venice's capital and resources until its conclusion in 1516. After the war ended, the parish priest Matteo Eletti worked to raise the money to complete the renovation, but the project was neglected again following his death in 1523. Throughout this period the church, though in a state of disrepair, was in continual use. Weekly masses and an annual ducal procession on Apostles' Sunday were recorded throughout the 16th century. In 1552 a wealthy doctor and philologist from Ravenna named Tommaso

Rangone offered to pay for the completion of the church's façade, on the condition that his portrait be incorporated into the design. While a generous offer, the Senate vetoed this proposal because they felt that a portrait celebrating an individual's accomplishments would be out of place on the façade of a building in the Piazza San Marco, the heart of Venice's religious and governmental systems. Finally, in 1557, the pievano Benedetto Manzini persuaded the Senate and three procuracies to finance the completion of the long-awaited renovation. Two procurators (Antonio Capello and Vettor Grimani), who happened to also be promoters of Jacopo Sansovino, were elected to supervise the project with Manzini. Perhaps in part due to their bias, they quickly approved Sansovino's plans for San Geminiano. By this point, a large part of the church had already been reconstructed, leaving only the roofing, dome, and façade for Sansovino to design and complete. The Senate and procuracies together contributed 2400 ducats to complete the renovation begun half a century before. Manzini himself paid 600 ducats for a new organ in the church.

Located across from the Basilica on the west side of the square, San Geminiano created a focal point to balance the surrounding formidable architecture. It, San Giuliano, and San Martino all used traditional ground plans with facades that recall Codussi's work[Figure 4]. San Geminiano's facade of white Istrian stone employs a two-order scheme that aligns with the elevations seen in the Library. A particular challenge of the site was to find a design that bridged the visual asymmetry of the adjoining wings of the Procuratie Nuove to the left and Procuratie Vecchie immediately to the right [Figure 5]. By using two orders of paired columns on the church facade, Sansovino was able to harmonize the Library with the three-order wing of the Procuratie Vecchie. Perhaps not entirely objectively, Francesco Sansovino, Jacopo's son,

reported that San Geminiano was “judged by everyone to be almost like a ruby among many pearls.”¹

Interior

The interior of this little parish church was no less remarkable than its façade. The original floor plan, designed by Cristoforo dal Legname, consisted of a central (Greek cross) plan, that is, a symmetrical design with the breadth of the church equaling the length [Figure 6]. A high altar, flanked by two apsidal chapels, occupied the western end of the church opposite the front entrance. The large central dome, supported inside by four freestanding columns, and four cupolas topped the entire structure. A new chapel, the Chapel in what we of the Crucifixion, was added to the north side of the church believe taking over what we believe was a house in 1566. Sansovino chose to be buried there after his death in 1570 so that, even after death, he would be associated with the grand piazza he helped design. He sculpted a St. John the Baptist figure for this chapel, but it was moved to the church of Santa Maria dei Frari where it now serves as a baptismal font, when San Geminiano was demolished [Figure 7]. Other details of the interior design of San Geminiano are not known, but it is probable that the interior would have closely resembled the extant, though deconsecrated, church of San Maurizio [Figure 8]. This church was reconstructed in 1806 using a floor plan similar to that of the nearby church of San Geminiano. Therefore, when reconstructing the lost church, one might imagine it having the patterned marble floors, plain walls, and interesting architectural details (such as Corinthian capitals, arches, and ceiling molding) that characterize San Maurizio.

San Geminiano contained a fairly large collection of religious paintings and sculptures before its destruction. Despite being scattered around the city, or perhaps the world, some of the pieces have been located thanks in great part to the artist and writer Marco Boschini. In 1664, he

¹ Sansovino, Francesco. *Delle cose notabili della città di Venetia*. (Venice 1583 edn.), p. 60.

took it upon himself to write a guide to Venetian painting titled *Le minere della pittura veneziana*. He carefully catalogued the paintings, and a few other art pieces, found in San Geminiano at the time. Starting from the main entrance facing the Piazza San Marco, he leads the reader clockwise around the church. The first painting to the left of the doorway is of the martyrdom of St. Catherine with an angel, which he attributes to Tintoretto. This image may be the painting Boschini describes, though without knowing its current location, it is difficult to verify this. The next piece Boschini mentions is the set of organ doors from the workshop of Paolo Veronese. The original organ doors, depicting St. Mennas and St. John the Baptist, are now in the Galleria Estense in Modena [Figure 10]. It is not known which “Last Supper” by Girolamo da Santa Croce originally hung in San Geminiano, but the artist did paint another painting of the same subject around the same time for San Francesco della Vigna, which provides a comparable aesthetic to the lost original [Figure 11]. Unfortunately, neither of the artists that Boschini mentions next, Leonardo Corona and Gioseffo Scolari, has turned up in our research of Venetian painting from this period. However, the next paintings Boschini mentions are two Madonna and Child images by Giovanni Bellini in the chapel of the High Altar. There are, of course, many examples of Bellini’s Madonna paintings, the one we are providing as an example is currently in the collection of the High Museum in Atlanta [Figure 12]. There are also multiple possibilities for the “Annunciation” by Paolo Veronese that Boschini claims was in the Chapel of the Madonna (the apsidal chapel to the right side of the High Altar as the viewer is facing it), though the one now in the Accademia in Venice seems the likeliest candidate since we know that other pieces from San Geminiano made their way there too [Figure 13]. Three more paintings from the workshop of Veronese (a small Visitation of the Magi, a lunette of angels adoring Christ, and a Deposition) have yet to be located. Continuing the clockwise tour of the

church, on the northern wall there was an altar with an altarpiece by Bernadin Muranese depicting St. Helena, St. Geminiano, and St. Mennas. This altar was commissioned by the scabbard-makers guild (the *vaginari*) and is now in the collection of the Accademia (unfortunately, no image is available). Moving into the Chapel of the Crucifixion, Boschini records two images by Bartolomeo Vivarini, a Mary Magdalene and a St. Barbara. Both are now in the collection of the Accademia in Venice [Figure 14]. In addition to these images catalogued by Boschini, there are supposedly three statues from San Geminiano now in the church of San Giovanni di Malta.

Destruction

By 1805, Venice had peaceably submitted to Napoleon's army and become a city under his Kingdom of Italy. While Napoleon appreciated the appointment of Piazza San Marco, the city was determined to be lacking the appropriate resources to host the Emperor, such as: great rooms for fetes and public ceremonies, a monumental staircase, and an entrance onto the Piazza. The most egregious deficiency in the square, according to Napoleon, was the absence of a ballroom to host imperial receptions. In 1807, to make way for such amenities the entire west side of the square, including San Geminiano and the adjoining wings of the Procuratie, was demolished. By 1808, construction on a new wing had begun. Two years later, in 1810, Giuseppe Maria Soli joined the project with a Neoclassical design for what would become the *Ala Napoleonica* or Napoleonic Wing of the Procuraties [Figure 15]. A grand staircase to reach the ballroom was provided by Lorenzo Santi for the design to be nearly complete. Finally in 1814, a large bronze "N" was placed at the center of the new wing's attic. Venice was only to suffer the indignity of a foreigner's domineering presence, whose values were at such odds with

the city, for one more year. The fall of Napoleon in 1815 was quickly celebrated by removing the great initial and dismantling a statue of Napoleon erected by the Ducal Palace.

In the process of surrendering to Napoleon, Piazza San Marco lost an interesting piece of architecture and part of Jacopo Sansovino's legacy in the city. Fortunately for the artist, Sansovino's remains were recovered from San Geminiano's demolition and moved to the Somascan monastery at the Salute. Opposite the Basilica, visitors will still find the Ala Napoleonica whose two-story elevation, a continuation of the Procuratie Nuove, creates a more uniform appearance in the square. Under the arcades of the Procurator's offices, three renowned coffee shops still operate: Gran Caffè Quadri, Caffè Florian, and Caffè Lavena. Atop the former site of San Geminiano, the Ala Napoleonica and part of the Procuratie Nuove house the Correr Civic Museum.

Though the existence of the Church of San Geminiano came to a sudden end, the legacy of its importance to the city of Venice is still very much alive in the landscape of the city, especially at the Piazza San Marco. The church's rich history provides insight to the bureaucracy and processes of urban design as well as to the artistic environment that Venice prided itself on. To appreciate this structure, its history and the implications of its destruction is to appreciate the greater Venetian consciousness of urban development and visual aesthetics and as such, can influence future plans of urban renewal and preservation.

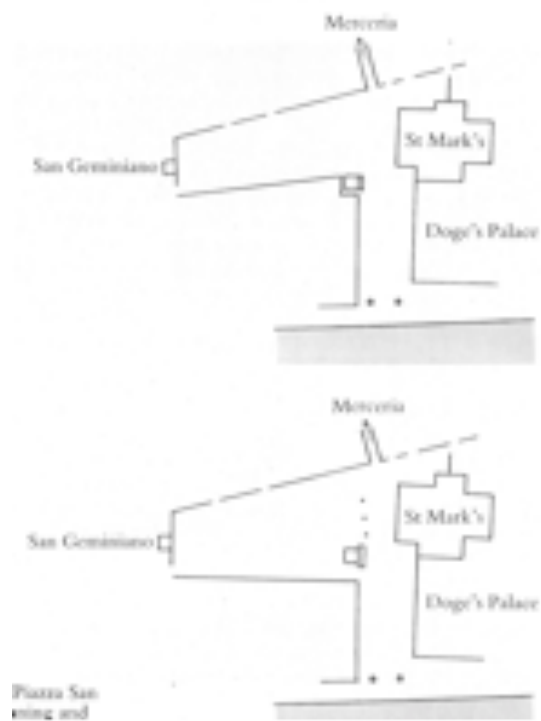


Figure 1: Sketch-plans of Piazza San Marco at beginning and end of 16th century



Figure 2: Jacopo Sansovino. San Giuliano, Venice. Façade begun 1553.



Figure 3: Jacopo Sansovino. San Martino, Venice. Begun 1540.



Figure 4: Visentini, engraving of Santo Spirito in Isola. 1777.

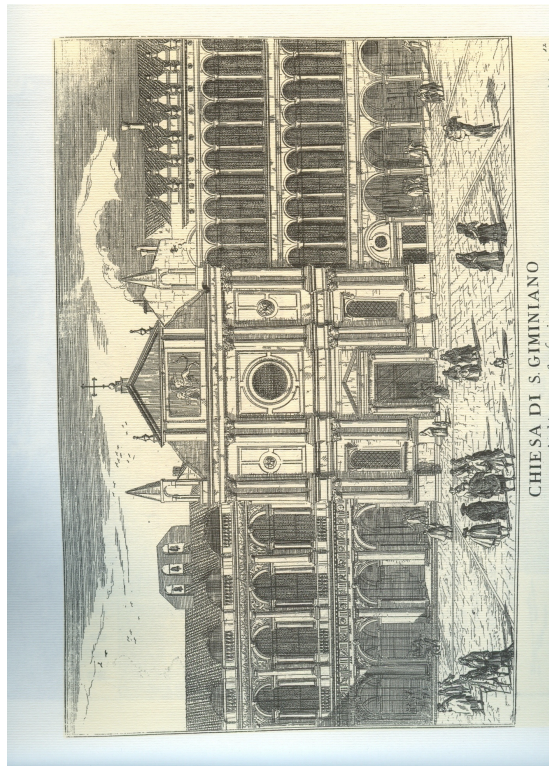


Figure 5: Carlevarjjs. Engraving of Sansovino's facade for San Geminiano.

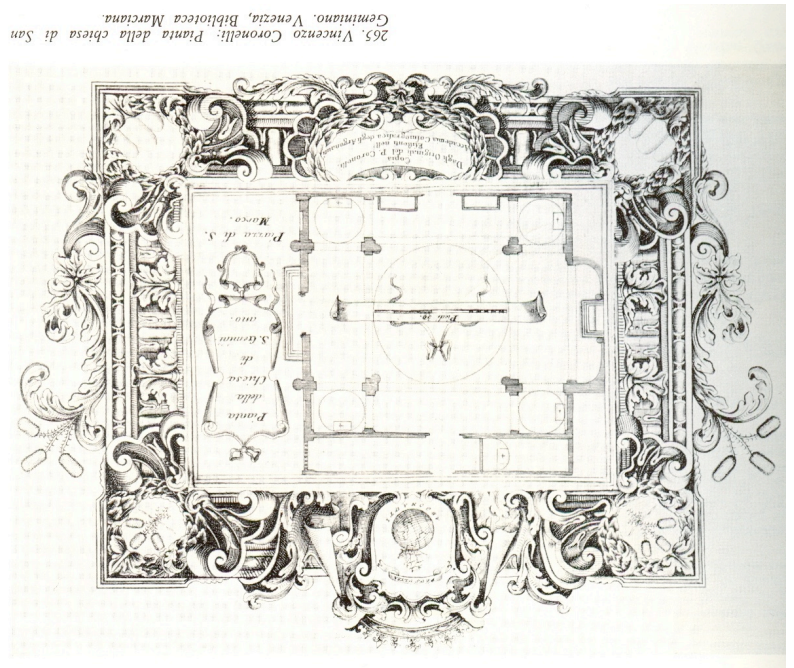


Figure 6: Vincenzo Coronelli, Sketch of Legname's Plan for San Geminiano.



Figure 7: Jacopo Sansovino, *St. John the Baptist*, 1566. Santa Maria dei Frari, Venice.



Figure 8: Interior of San Maurizio, begun 1807.

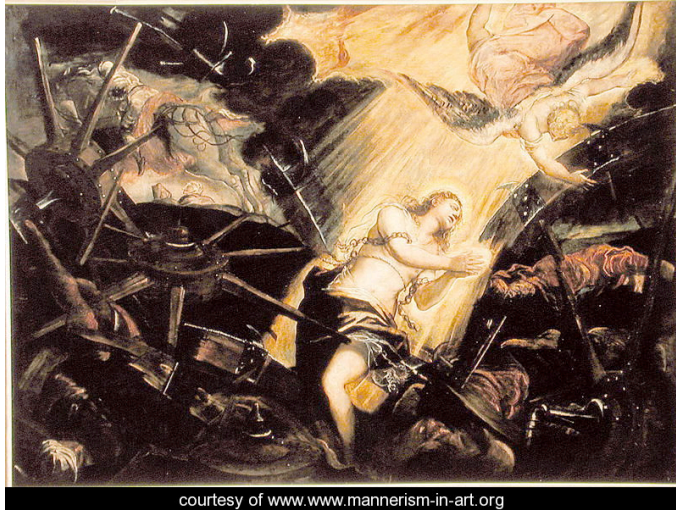


Figure 9: Tintoretto, *St. Catherine enduring the Torture of the Wheel*.

Figure 10: Paolo Veronese, *St. John the Baptist and St. Mennas*, organ doors, c. 1490.



Figure 11: Girolamo da Santacroce, *The Last Supper*, c 1500.



Figure 12: Giovanni Bellini, *Madonna and Child*, ca. 1510. High Museum of Art, Atlanta.



Figure 13: Paolo Veronese, *Annunciation*, 1556. Accademia, Venice.



Figure 14: Bartolomeo Vivarini, *Mary Magdalene and Saint Barbara*. Accademia, Venice.



Figure 15: Giuseppe Maria Soli, Ala Napoleonica, begun 1810.